1: Ammar E, I-5 (1951) 1954
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Silwa

Chapter Four

BIRTH, INFANCY AND EARLY TRAINING

PREGNANCY and giving birth are perhaps the most important events in a married woman's life, and therefore the characteristics and symptoms of pregnancy are easily recognized in the female circles in the village. Unless otherwise stated most of the information given in this chapter has been supplied by a female relative of the writer. The informant divided the period of pregnancy into three main stages:

The first is the month of secrecy (al shahr al sirry) when, at the stopping of menstruation, the woman realizes that she is going to conceive. The news should be kept a secret from all except the closest family circle. If any neighbours or visitors should enquire about it, it should be positively denied. This atmosphere of secrecy should be kept up as long as possible for fear of the evil eye. It is believed that at this early stage the embryo is more susceptible to the influences of the evil eye than at any other stage.

In the second month, the woman may declare, still with reluctance, that she is heavy, or carrying (thagila or hamil). During this month it is said she is prone to feel dizzy (daikha), and is much inclined to stretch and sleep readily. It is believed that during this period also God starts shaping the prospective baby; consequently a pregnant woman should not be awakened by anybody if she is asleep, lest such disturbance hamper or interfere with the process of creation. Children's congenital defects or abnormalities, e.g. six fingers, split lip, bulging forehead, are attributed to the fact that the mother's sleep was disturbed during this period.

The third important stage is that of craving (waham) which is experienced by the woman during the third and fourth months. During this stage the pregnant woman is allowed free and wider choice in her food. She is demanding articles of food which she 'craves for' continually, and they are usually items that are rare or at least not within everyday access, e.g. melons, fruit, savouries and the like. Eating is supposed to stand her in good stead during the ordeal of pregnancy and birth.

The husband must do his best to provide his wife with what she craves for, otherwise he would be socially disparaged by his wife's family. It is a common theme in village gossip to refer to a woman who is always strain-

[P. 86 is blank]

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
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CHAPTER XVII

THE VILLAGE STORY-TELLER AND HIS TALES

538 [217] THE modern Egyptian peasants are as fond of stories as were their ancestors in the days of Herodotus. Since few of the older people can read or write they have largely to depend for such entertainment on the public recitations of story-tellers. Most villages possess at least one story-teller, who, as a rule, has some trade with which he is engaged during the day. In the evening the male villagers are in the habit of congregating in one another's houses, or in some shop or *café*. To such a gathering the story-teller is a welcome addition, and he tells his [465] tales in return for very small sums of money presented to him by members of his audience. The story-teller may have taken [424] years to collect his tales, or he may have inherited them from his forbears. The peasant is an excellent *raconteur*, possessed of great imagination, very dramatic, and entirely free from self-consciousness.

538 124 114 Among my village friends are two or three story-tellers, and from them I have collected and written down a large number of tales. Some were related to me in my brother's desert camp the first year I was in Egypt. I would appoint a day for the story-teller to visit me, and, as the hour approached, I would see him and the schoolmaster who came with him to assist me in my translations of the stories riding across the lower desert on donkeys. On their arrival coffee was brought, and, when they had partaken [516] of this refreshment, the story-teller seated himself cross-legged on the ground, drew his robe around him, and, after some minutes' reflection, began one of his tales.

538 115 One of my story-teller friends, a cheery person, was a dyer by trade, as, indeed, was made evident by the state of his hands, which were stained almost as dark a blue as his cotton clothes. When he was a young boy he was apprenticed to a firm of dyers, [463] and he would listen to stories told to his fellow-workmen as they plied their task. Having a retentive memory, he stored up all

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
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these tales, which he now relates to the people of his village in the evening. He also tells his tales to his customers, who often wait while he is dying the cloth which they have brought him. Thus some tedious hours of waiting are pleasantly whiled away.

When he first came to me he was somewhat shy, but after a while, seeing that I was really interested, he would start off without hesitation. Sometimes he would consult the schoolmaster as to what he thought would be most to my taste, giving him a short epitome of two or three stories. Then, when a suitable one was chosen, he would go ahead without further delay. Several stories were recited at a sitting, and occasionally I was writing them down for three or four hours on end. Our servants would often stand near, listening in breathless attention as the plot developed.

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FIG. 153. STORY-TELLER, WHO IS ALSO A WATER-CARRIER BY TRADE

The next year I engaged another man, who was a water-carrier by trade (Fig. 153). I was then living in tents near an out-of-the-way village in Upper Egypt, and the *'omdeh* (headman of the village) kindly placed his reception-room at my disposal. Wealthier villagers would drop in from time to time and take a seat at a respectful distance from me, while humbler folk stood at the doorway, or squatted on the threshold, all alike listening enthralled, and from time to time uttering ejaculations of appreciation.

I was assured that these tales had never been committed to writing, but had been handed down orally. It may interest my readers to peruse the following, selected from a large number in my possession.

8:Schaefer A-5 (1900-1901) 1904
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Upper Egypt

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Photograph by the author.

محمود محمد العتر

Mahmûd Mohammed el-'Itr
Watchman of the Administration of Antiquities in the Desert of Saqqāra.

[p.ii] [p.iii is blank]

8:Schaefer A-5 (1900-1901) 1904
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think that among these unpretentious verses are some, which will give others as much pleasure as they did me.[1]

I wrote down the collection in the winter of 1900—1901, during the excavations of the Berlin Museum at the sun-temple of the old king, Ne-user-Rē, at Abūṣîr. (The ruin is called by the people: Abu Gūrâb.) In spite of this, not one of my informants was a Būṣîri (man of Abūṣîr), but the entire collection of songs comes from Sa''āris[2] (Saqqāries), inhabitants of Sa''āra (Saqqāra), familiar to all travelers. The nucleus, some forty, I obtained from our black Abu Bekr Ibrâhîm es-Sūdâni, a bright, half-grown lad, whose family for several generations, had lived in Egypt. The remainder, with but few exceptions, were contributed by our old rafîr (watchman), Maḥmûd Moḥammed el-'Itr. All the other songs also, were rewritten at his dictation, so that all these printed texts give his pronunciation, which was very beautiful and clear. The old man was indefatigable; every day he came with a new song. "Write! — A new one has flown into my head", were usually his words. When the text was

[1]) A few songs from this collection have already been printed in Arbeit und Rythmus, by K. Buecher (Leipzig, Teubner 1902), and in No. 14 of the Mitteilungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft.

[2]) The Arabic letter qāf, which in this vicinity is either not pronounced at all, or is spoken like a sharp hiātus, I designate with: '. I found this pronunciation as far as Ehnasya near Beni-Suēf.

8:Schaefer A-5 (1900-1901) 1904
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once fixed, he would patiently repeat it four or five times for correction, and proved himself an excellent commentator, in spite of some misconceptions, which, undoubtedly, may have slipped in. He could neither read nor write, which fact I think was, for my purpose, very fortunate; and I was glad, also, that he knew no other language than his own. It is a pleasure to recall the time, when I spent the greater part of my leisure moments, squatting before the low, reed-covered watchman's-hut, built of the stones from the debris of the excavations, while I looked into the alert face of the one-eyed, old man, and talked with him. I wrote down the songs at once in the transliteration. Only in the case of doubtful words, in order to make certain of the consonants, did I employ a scribe to take down the Arabic at Maḥmûds dictation.[1] I hope, therefore, to be able to offer a comparatively reliable Arabic text. Maḥmûd declared decidedly several times, that none of the songs was composed by himself. The title of my book, therefore, must not be misunderstood; it is intended only to state, that it presents the entire fund of songs which Maḥmûd knew. They are songs which are

[1]) It is a veritable cross, that the uneducated scribes, who never pronounce the qāf, either do not write it at all, or indicate it by the alif. Because of this, many words are disfigured beyond recognition. It was a great help to me, to have among our workmen, several from Quft in Upper Egypt, who pronounce the qāf like hard g. In doubtful cases I had them repeat the words in question, and could thus determine the lacking qāfs.